V 2
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Unitarian Horizons

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PETER AND THE PITCHFORK

IN the spring of the year 1775 there was great excitement and controversy within the First Parish in Petersham, Massachusetts. The conflict raging in all thirteen colonies was at fever heat in this lovely village; and the center of the storm was Aaron Whitney, minister of the First Parish from its founding in 1738, against whom—to quote the parish historian—"the tide of popu-

lar indignation rose at length to the highest pitch" because he "continued, both in his sermons and his prayers, to inculcate submission to the sovereign."

The patriotic people of Petersham could stand this sort of loyalty to a certain point only. Then they proceeded to action. Near the close of the year 1774 they refused any longer to pay his salary, but this had no effect. In May, 1775, they voted to forbid him to enter his pulpit; and "in pursuance of this vote an armed Guard was stationed at the meeting-house door, who, when the minister arrived, and would have entered as usual, refused to allow him to pass." The armed Guard was a half-breed Indian, named Peter Gore; and so (tradition avers) his weapon was a pitchfork!

TRUE INDEPENDENCY

THUS effectively shut out from his church, Aaron Whitney proceeded to his own house, where he continued preaching his objectionable brand of loyalty unmolested. When he died, the people of the town erected a monument in his honor, mindful of his many years of faithful shepherding of souls and graciously overlooking his stubborn refusal to make his preaching and prayers conform to the changed sentiments of his congregation.

In all this, the First Parish in Petersham was merely running true to form, merely illustrating the high spirit of independency which, in the eighteenth century, was characteristic of New England Congregationalism. The church was the final judge—not the minister—as to what should be said in the pulpit, whether the words were addressed to the people in the pews or to Almighty God. Samuel Mather, whose "Apology for the Liberties of the Churches in New England" was published in 1738, summed up the prevailing doctrine in regard to the ultimate authority of the congregation in these words: "Let them never blindly resign themselves to the direction of their ministers." The admonition was scarcely needed. As a matter of fact, they almost never did.

WHEN LOYALTIES CLASH

THE same independence of the local parish was asserted and maintained as over against any external ecclesiastical body. There were such things as "Church Councils," but their authority was very plainly determined and the limits of their power were strictly enforced. Here again Samuel Mather had set forth the general rule when he said of such Councils that they "neither pretend to nor desire any power that is juridical. If they can but instruct and per-

suade, they gain their end; but when they have done all, the churches are still free to accept or refuse their advice."

I must confess to a deep-seated respect for this eighteenth-century spirit of complete local autonomy in church affairs. It was hard on Aaron Whitney, to be sure; but he had the comfort of a sound conscience while he lived and the perhaps less obvious consolation of a monument—erected at public expense—after his death. He may have resented Peter Gore's pitchfork, but somehow I like to imagine that he respected the authority which it symbolized. Perhaps, way down underneath, he even agreed with the decision which kept him out of his pulpit. At any rate, he remained steadfast in the loyalty to his sovereign which brought him into so sharp a conflict with the new-found loyalty of his people; and that sort of steadfastness wins respect in the end, no matter how widely opinions may differ. There is a downright and forthright quality in the whole story that stirs my admiration, and I salute both minister and people.

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

BUT there is surely a more excellent way than that which leads to the use of armed guards at the church door! Stubborn steadfastness is excellent, to be sure, but it lacks the

gracious note of mutual respect and forbearance, and conflict cannot produce the highest form of spiritual victory. The nineteenth century can testify to a real advance over the eighteenth, in these high matters as well as in material progress.

The most striking and convincing proof of this advance that I happen to know is to be found on the walls of the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, where a tablet stands with this inscription:

IN MEMORY
OF
EVANS ROGERS
1792–1870
AN HONOURABLE MERCHANT
OF THIS CITY
AND FOR FORTY YEARS A MEMBER
OF THIS CONGREGATION
WHO IN THE DARK DAYS OF SLAVERY
AND WITH TIES BINDING HIM
TO THE SOUTH
STEADFASTLY UPHELD THE
UNRESTRICTED LIBERTY OF SPEECH
IN THE PULPIT
WHEREBY A MORAL SUPPORT
OF RARE VALUE WAS AFFORDED
TO THE MINISTER OF THIS CHURCH
WHOSE SON OUT OF GRATITUDE
ERECTS THIS TABLET
1907

Now feeling ran as high in the days preceding the war between the states as it did in the days of Patrick Henry and Sam Adams. Slavery was as bitter and divisive an issue as taxation without representation. William Henry Furness was as outspoken in his pulpit as Aaron Whitney was in his. But Evans Rogers marks a tremendous spiritual advance over Peter Gore and the men who set him on the church steps with a pitchfork in his hands. It is a new level of civilized human relations which is reached by this honourable merchant of the City of Brotherly Love—a level which we of the twentieth century may well admire and strive to attain.

PRINCIPLE AT STAKE

THERE was no lack of steadfastness in the soul of Evans Rogers—he possessed as strong and stiff a moral backbone as the most stubborn Puritan of them all. But he was steadfast in a different way. He was concerned to maintain his own personal convictions as to what was right and what was wrong, but he was even more concerned to maintain a principle without which no moral convictions can endure or grow in power over men's lives. He was bound to the South by ties of family and affection and honest belief, but he was bound even more strongly to faith in unrestricted liberty

of speech in the pulpit. And so he steadfastly upheld the right of the minister of his church to state views with which he himself could not agree. Others who shared his opinions on the burning question of the day might leave the church if they wished, in anger or in sorrow; but he chose to stay, and the moral support thus afforded to the minister of that church was beyond any calculation or price.

AND WHAT OF US TODAY?

IN this fourth decade of the twentieth century, we are once again living in a tumultuous world where issues of tremendous import divide men into as utterly opposing camps as ever were known in the past. Once again churches are faced with the fundamental question of what to do when opinions honestly and vigorously expressed in the pulpit run counter to equally honest and vigorous opinions held by laymen and laywomen in the pews. How far do we believe in the principle of unrestricted liberty of speech in the pulpit? That is today no merely academic question. Tomorrow it is likely to be the most immediate and pressing of all questions. What are we doing to prepare ourselves to deal with it as mature and civilized human beings?

Are we going to resort to pitchforks? That will depend upon both ministers and laymen, upon

the degree of genuine tolerance and maturity of spirit which we have developed together in our churches, upon the level of civilization we have reached in our dealings with one another, upon the amount of real Christianity which we have attained. It cannot be done suddenly, on the spur of the moment; but it can be done by taking thought sufficiently in advance and by deliberately training ourselves to bear and forbear. If we care enough about it, we can make the spirit of Evans Rogers the guiding light of our free churches; and then there will be no reason to fear the outcome.

F. M. E.

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